

EDITORIAL: Firing Admiral Fallon

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It appears all too typical of U.S. President George W. Bush that when he finally stumbles inadvertently on a wise, experienced strategic thinker for a high command position he moves quickly to fire him.

That was the fate of Admiral William Fallon, who has just been forced to "retire" after only one year running Central Command, or CENTCOM, the U.S. military command for the Middle East, including Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Admiral Fallon's appointment little more than a year ago in January 2007 startled many observers because he had no background in land warfare and therefore seemed an odd choice to oversee the low intensity conflicts being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What Adm. Fallon was, however, was the world's leading expert among current senior serving officers on the tactical challenges of projecting aircraft carrier-based air power against land targets. His appointment was therefore a clear indication that the Bush administration, even after its disastrous and rash rush to war on Iraq, had not ruled out the use of force against Iran to halt its nuclear program, but was, rather, actively preparing for such an eventuality.

However, Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney did not get what they bargained for in Adm. Fallon. Far from being a hawk on Iran eager for the chance to show off what his aircraft carrier combat wings could do in knocking out the Iranian cyclotrons, he quickly proved to be a cautious pragmatist on the issue - and an outspoken one at that. His public statement to al-Jazeera last fall particularly irked the armchair warriors who still dominate policy making on Iran in the White House, the National Security Council and - although it is not widely realized - in Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's State Department.

Administration insiders say that Adm. Fallon infuriated the neocons in the administration, now led by Deputy National Security Adviser Elliot Abrams. Columnist Max Boot made it clear in his Los Angeles Times column Wednesday that he was out for the admiral's blood.

Nor did it help that Adm. Fallon's public demeanor in his appearances on Capitol Hill was invariably cautious and dignified. In the feverish, superficial atmosphere of 10-second sound-bites that now defines Washington political discourse, this automatically defined him as "boring" and "stupid."

In reality, Adm. Fallon had an outstanding strategic and diplomatic intellect in addition to his unmatched expertise in the tactical issues of projecting naval air power against ground targets. The Bush administration cannot afford to lose his experience and expertise that it has so casually thrown away. Adm. Fallon's stature will only be enhanced rather than diminished by his departure. A departure which raises many more questions than it provides answers for; principally, how concerned should the people in the Middle East be by the admiral's sudden resignation?